THE WAY OF THE HEART
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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 1
James 3:13–18
Mark 8:27–33

"But who do you say that I am?"
Mark 8:29 (NRSV)

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside,
he came to those who knew him not. He speaks to us the same word:
"Follow thou me!" and he sets before us
the tasks which he has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey him,
whether they be wise or simple, he will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings,
which they shall pass through in his fellowship, and, as an effable mystery, they shall learn
in their own experience who he is.

Albert Schweitzer
The Quest for the Historical Jesus

When Oregon State University students in a class on religion and American culture are asked to describe their impressions of Christianity, they consistently respond with five adjectives. Christianity is

literalistic
anti-intellectual
self-righteous
judgmental
bigoted

That distressing information is the context of a new book by Marcus Borg, Professor of Religion and Culture at Oregon State University, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith.*

Borg, who is a Christian and a New Testament scholar, asks his students about their impressions of Christianity and that is how they answer—literalistic, anti-intellectual, self-righteous, judgmental, bigoted. Borg concludes that what the students are describing—the Christianity that is in

the media a lot these days—is an older, earlier form or paradigm of Christianity. But there is a new paradigm emerging that students are surprised to discover.

The older paradigm is narrow, exclusive—"our way or the highway"—literalistic about the Bible, seemingly threatened by modern science, by modern life itself. It also defines Christian faith as believing ideas about Jesus, giving intellectual assent to ideas. The emerging paradigm is more and deeper than that. It is open, hospitable, not threatened by science and modernity, not fundamentalist or literalist about the Bible, and, most important, it understands that religious faith is far deeper than a set of ideas, that it is a matter of the heart, not solely the head.

Borg's own experience, he says, is typical. He writes, "From my mid-teens to mid-thirties, Christianity did not make much sense to me. Largely for intellectual reasons, the form of Christianity that I learned in my childhood ceased to be persuasive" (p. xi). There are millions of people he says, whose experience is similar but who have dropped out and now belong to the "Church Alumni/Alumnae Association."

Borg's argument, and it is an important one, is that Christianity does make sense; that there are no intellectual obstacles to being a Christian, that the sacrifice Christianity asks of us is not a sacrifice of the intellect. Indeed, Christian faith urges us to think and think hard: because Christian faith is about trusting the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ, we are free to use our God-given intellects, our reason, our rational capacities to the fullest extent of our abilities. We are called, as the Bible says, to love God with all our heart, strength, soul, and mind.

But faith is more than ideas. Believing in Jesus Christ is more than giving intellectual assent to ideas about him.

One time the matter arises for the disciples of Jesus. The incident is recorded in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Some say it is the pivotal incident in the life of Jesus, the most critical, defining text in the New Testament.

Walking along the road together, Jesus asks them, "What are people saying about me? Who are people saying I am?" It is the PR question: How are we doing out there? His disciples tell him that some people are confusing him with another popular preacher, John the Baptist. Some are saying he sounds and looks a lot like Elijah. Others think he's like the prophets of old. And then Jesus turns the question on them: "But who do you say that I am?"

You would think they had it figured out, that they knew exactly who he was. But Mark makes clear that his disciples did not understand, that they were

following him without having their theology, their creedal affirmations worked out. Peter answers, takes a risk, says something astonishing, something no one had said before, something that, according to his own religion, could be construed as blasphemous: “You are the Messiah,” the Christ, the anointed one of God. It must have been quite a moment.

Jesus used the occasion to push them further. Because of what Peter acknowledged, what Peter recognized in his brave affirmation, there will be hardship ahead for Jesus, maybe for them: suffering and death. And then Peter, so human, so like you and me, shows that he really doesn’t understand, picks an argument with Jesus about the suffering prediction. “Of course you won’t suffer, Jesus,” he says. “Get behind me Satan,” Jesus responds. Peter doesn’t get it either. All in all, it is quite a moment.

Author Kathleen Norris set out recently to write a poem about this incident. She says that whenever she hears the question Jesus asks his disciples —“Who do you say that I am?”—“I try to imagine how I would answer. . . . My response comes out something like, ‘I’m not ready to say, I’m not sure, I’m still working on it.’” Norris, who has given her heart to Jesus says, “He is the Light” (*Context,* September 2006).

What really was Jesus asking them? Did he want them to be able to recite a creed, a statement of faith, a well-honed theological treatise on Incarnation? It would seem not. It seems that what he is asking them that day is about trust and about following. He goes on to invite them to follow by taking up a cross, to find their true lives by losing them for his sake. If we allow this critical incident to define faith for us, we see that it is about more than intellectual assent. Faith is about trusting Jesus, listening to Jesus, and following Jesus through whatever lies ahead, giving your heart to Jesus.

Marcus Borg states, “In the Bible and Christian tradition, the ‘heart’ is a metaphor for a deep level of the self, a level below our thinking, feeling, willing. . . . Our heart is deeper than our head” (p. 26).

In is book *Credo*, published just before he died last year, William Sloane Coffin wrote, “Credo . . . I believe . . . is best translated, ‘I have given my heart to Jesus.’ ”

Again, it does not mean that religious faith is in conflict with human reason, that believing in Jesus means shutting down your intellectual life, not doubting, questioning, raising tough questions. Coffin, a great thinker himself, wrote, “There’s nothing anti-intellectual in the leap of faith, for faith is not believing without proof but trusting without reservation. Faith is no substitute for thinking. On the contrary it is what makes good thinking possible. . . . If we give our lives to Christ, if we leave familiar territory and

take the leap of faith, what we receive in return fills our minds altogether as much as it fills our hearts" (p. 8). It was an important part of my journey when I discovered in college that there were some really smart Christians, that Christian scholars hold their own with the other scholarly disciplines, that giving your heart to Jesus can also mean giving your mind as well. *New York Times* columnist David Brooks advised recently that before you dismiss religion because it isn't compatible with reason, get acquainted with a really smart theologian, like Reinhold Niebuhr.

Although faith is not merely reason, faith and reason are compatible companions. Religious faith and human reason belong together. That is a point Pope Benedict was trying to make in a speech at the University of Regensburg, in Germany, last week. The speech was a careful defense of the rationality of faith in God and the religious imperative to think and to act rationally. The pope's intent was to call for the compatibility of faith and reason. Unfortunately, in the process he used a quote from a Byzantine emperor from 1391, who was, in fact, in a conversation with a Muslim leader. The emperor said that the Muslim tradition of spreading the faith by the sword was evil and inhuman. The response in the Muslim world was exactly the opposite from the pope's intent. Clarence Page wrote last week that the controversial quote "gave Islamic militants another excuse to act irrationally in the name of faith." Someone wisely said that if you are in a room filled with gasoline fumes, it's not a great idea to light a match.

The pope did not cite elements in Judaism and Christianity that have also been used to justify violence, but could have.

Clarence Page editorialized, "We need reasoned dialogue, not war, between faiths."

And yet if faith is only ideas, propositions, we end up inevitably in an argument about whose ideas are true and whose are not. That, Marcus Borg says, is where the conversation happens for most people. Embracing a religion for modern men and women means concluding that my ideas are right and yours are wrong. And once you buy into that way of being faithful, religion becomes a barrier between people, a path of intolerance and disrespect. If religion is a matter of my truth being better and more true than your truth, then I cannot compromise, I cannot relate to you in any way other than as a candidate for conversion to my way, my truth. To accept, to respect, to listen to are not virtues but a form of betrayal.

That is precisely the kind of religion that ends up condoning violence toward the other, the infidel. It is not physically violent, but a form of it is revealed in the insistence on the part of some evangelical Christians that under no circumstances, even public ones, is it faithful not to be specifically, exclusively, Christian. There is currently a bill in the House of

Representatives, sponsored by evangelical Christians, that would allow military chaplains to offer sectarian prayers at nondenominational, nonsectarian events. There is a long-standing military tradition of respect for people of other religions or no religion. Chaplains pray in the name of Jesus at Christian worship services and in the name of Allah at Muslim services. But at mandatory events, attended by men and women representing the diversity of the armed forces and our culture itself, chaplains avoid sectarian-specific language. How unfortunate that given the opportunity to express the grace and acceptance and inclusivity of their Lord, Christians once again seem exclusive and intolerant and disrespectful.

And how important it is that the sanctuary of Fourth Presbyterian Church was filled on Friday and Saturday with Jewish neighbors, members of our neighbor synagogue, Chicago Sinai Congregation, observing the High Holy Days of Judaism, Rosh Hashanah.

“Who do you say that I am?” The Christian church is the institution responsible for making a corporate answer to Jesus’ question.

Frederick Buechner tells about a Christmas pageant in an Episcopal church. All the characters were down front at the chancel steps, gathered around the manger. Most of the children were dressed as angels, the angelic choir that at just the right moment was supposed to sing “Glory to God in the highest.” But there were a lot of angels crowded into a small space, and the ones in the back couldn’t see what was happening in the front. “Glory to God in the highest,” they sang on cue. And then one little girl, in the very back row “electrified the whole church by crying out in a voice shrill with irritation and frustration at having her view blocked, ‘Let Jesus show’” (*Secrets in the Dark*, pp. 267–8).

That’s what we’re here for: to let Jesus show. Buechner writes, “There is so much that hides Jesus, the church itself hides him, all the hoopla. . . . Let Jesus show in these churches we have built for him not just Jesus as we cut him down to size in sermons and hymns and stained glass windows, but Jesus as he sat among his friends and spoke about his death” (p. 269). So yes, let Jesus show, as he walked the dusty roads of Palestine, as he sat on the hillside teaching. Let Jesus show as he welcomed the sick and discouraged, the blind and poor, the outcast and rejected. Let Jesus show as he gathered and held the children and as one day he asked them, asks us, “Who do you say that I am?”

Who do you say that he is? It’s not the same as believing ideas about him. Instead, Buechner says, it is a “matter of giving our hearts to him, of come hell or high water putting our money on him, trusting him the way a child believes a mother or father.”

I cannot read this text, the time when Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” without remembering a lesson my father taught me. I’ve told this story before, but over the years it has become even more important and more precious to me. I had just preached my first sermon in my home church after my ordination. I chose this passage as my text. I chose it because it was the passage on which I had written my thesis to graduate from divinity school. I knew, or thought I knew, everything there was to know about this passage. My sermon was, I thought, brilliant, a small, tight, well-reasoned academic thesis, full of quotes and citations. Afterward, sitting in the living room when the family lunch was over, Dad complimented me, said he was proud of me. And then he taught me a lesson of faith. “You told us what everybody else in the world thought about Jesus. Next time, leave some time at the end for what you think.”

That’s what it all comes down to. You and I may not have it all figured out yet. You may have lots of doubts. You may not have a satisfactory personal doctrine of the Incarnation or the Atonement. Sadly, you may have held back from the whole enterprise, held back from church, from giving your heart to Jesus because you think you have to have the answers worked out before you get in. Well, you don’t. You may have joined instead the Church Alumni Association because your religious ideas don’t seem very orthodox or conventional.

The question he puts, however, is a question of the heart.

The invitation is not to write a thesis but to trust him, to bet everything on him. It means to consider the proposal that he is the truth—not a truth that excludes others or targets others, but truth for you—and that the truest, best, most authentically human way to live this one, singular life of yours is by following him.

It is to be willing to risk it—to trust that he knew what he was saying when he said that it is more blessed to give than receive, that you receive your life when you give it away. It is an invitation to trust him when he says God is merciful and kind, that forgiveness and reconciliation are for real. It is an invitation to give your heart to him when he says, “Blessed are the peacemakers, the meek, the seekers.” It is to trust him, to bet everything on him when he says, and when it comes time for you to say, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” It is the invitation to bet everything on him when he says “I will be with you always.”

It is the invitation to follow him into the future, wherever it leads for you, and to discover, as they did, who he is, as you stumble along behind, throughout all your days, in love and gratitude and praise.

Thee will I cherish
Thee will I honor
Thou my soul's glory, joy, and crown.
Fairest Lord Jesus.
(from the hymn "Fairest Lord Jesus)

Dear God, we don't have all the answers. Sometimes we're not sure what we believe.
Sometimes we couldn't begin to put it into words. But in Jesus Christ we have heard you speak
to us, each of us in our own way. And so we thank you, dear God, for him, our Lord Christ,
and for that in each of us, in our hearts, that would love him, and follow him, and trust him.
In his name we pray. Amen.